

## Sparkling and inspiring: Charles Kennedy was a rare politician

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## THE CONVERSATION

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# Sparkling and inspiring: Charles Kennedy was a rare politician

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Charles Kennedy has died at the age of 55. PA/Fiona Hanson

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I first met Charles Kennedy in 1990. He was working his first job as MP for Ross, Cromarty & Skye, (now Ross, Skye & Lochaber) and I was working mine, as Research Assistant to Simon Hughes. There were eight years between us but Charles wasn't the kind of person to let the pecking order get in the way. He was a colleague and friend for 25 years.

The words that are pouring out about him this morning, following his tragic untimely death aged just 55, are all true. Kind, decent, witty, engaging, sincere and very human.

Back then Charles was already hotly tipped to lead the Liberal Democrats. He possessed an unusual combination of qualities, having a sophisticated grasp of political issues, a natural ability to communicate and a personal warmth that made him universally popular.

Charles was born on November 25 1959. His father, Ian, worked as a draughtsman, and his mother, Mary, raised Charles and his siblings, Ian and Isabel in Fort William, where his family belonged to a long line of Highland crofters.

He began to stand out at Lochaber High School, polishing his skills in the debating society and going to study first English, then politics and philosophy, at Glasgow University. There the debating famously continued, and he was elected President of the Union. A Labour Party member initially, Charles was drawn to the newly-formed SDP, inspired by the rhetoric of Roy Jenkins. He joined in 1982.

### A young face in parliament

Continuing his studies, Charles moved to the US where he focused on political communication. He was pursuing a PhD at the University of Indiana when he was, somewhat surprisingly, selected as SDP candidate for the Highland seat that he went on to represent for 30 years. Victory there was equally surprising – indeed so unexpected that Charles was already returning to the US when the results came through. It propelled him into the House of Commons, as its youngest MP, aged just 23.



Nick Clegg succumbs to the Kennedy charm. Dave Thompson / PA

Charles became a stalwart member of the parliamentary team, first under David Steel, then Paddy Ashdown. In 1999 he fought off five contenders to become leader of the Liberal Democrats, whose numbers had more than doubled in 1997 to 46 MPs.

## Rising to the top

His leadership marked a significant shift in the party's history, both politically and organisationally. He positioned the Lib Dems as far away as he could from Ashdown's failed project to collaborate with Tony Blair, the aim was to be equidistant from both Labour and the Conservatives.

The agonising decision to oppose the Iraq War was taken with true conviction. It put the party distinctively on the political map, and while not intentionally placing the party to the left of Labour, drew increasing electoral support from those who were.

Another defining moment came when Charles introduced a Liberal Democrat shadow cabinet, complete with spokespeople and the determination to be taken seriously. This marked a shift towards professionalisation – a move to give power to the “suits” rather than the “sandals”. He added a bold new fundraising strategy and took advice from unusual sources, including hedge-funders and corporate businessmen.

Charles was a very different leader to his predecessor, in both style and political inclination. He was more laid-back than Ashdown, more hands-off, and during his eight years at the helm, presided loosely over the wider organisation that eventually became more fragmented, with power more diffused across a number of different bases.

And the strategy worked. By 2005, Charles had increased the number of Liberal Democrats in Westminster from 46 to 62 – the highest ever representation for the party.

He was an extremely popular leader, both inside and outside his party. He hated the nickname Chat-show-Charlie but it reflected his affable relaxed TV style. Despite his popularity and his successes though, his very personal struggle with alcoholism led to his resignation in 2006. The intervention of Ed Davey, Sarah Teather, Sandra Gidley and David Laws, among 25 front-bench colleagues who forced his hand, is well documented.



Kennedy resigned the leadership in 2006. Fiona Hanson /PA

Behind the scenes where I worked from 2002-2006, the Kennedy office appeared a loving but at times dysfunctional family. Anna Werrin, Charles' close friend and gatekeeper, ran a famously tight ship, allowing nothing past the leader without her say-so.

A hardworking and loyal team supported him very happily and were both astonished and furious when his eventual demise came at the hand of his own party. Despite some moralising, the Lib Dems simply needed a leader who was fit and strong enough for the historic moment that lay ahead.

## Back to his roots

He was just 47 with party leadership already behind him. Now married to Sarah Gurling, and with a young son, Donald, Charles reverted back to the university environment he had previously so enjoyed. He told me that of all the work he did, behind representing his constituency and being a father, he most relished being rector of the University of Glasgow, a post he held from 2008 to 2014.

During that time Charles divorced, lost his mother, and days in to the general election campaign of 2015, his father. To then lose the seat he had held for so long would have been heartbreaking.

The sadness at losing such a capable and wise political mind will be felt keenly in Westminster. He did a great deal of good and remained humble in public service. His ability to sparkle, entertain, persuade and inspire will be sorely missed.

Above all, Charles will be remembered affectionately by all who knew him for his warmth, wit, vision and integrity. Personally I'll remember him for joining me on numerous occasions for a laugh – and a sneaky fag out the back.

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